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ABSTRACT

A survey was made of the attitudes of school personnel toward specific dimensions of the Regent's Action Plan for improving education in the State of New York. Responses revealed (1) a strong negative reaction to the proficiency requirement in foreign language, (2) support by elementary teachers for an increase in secondary testing requirements and support by secondary teachers for an increase in elementary testing requirements, (3) lack of support by secondary teachers for an interdisciplinary project, (4) opposition to remedial programs, (5) support for reporting test results to the public and the state, and (6) opposition to an extension of the school year. Overall, reports from the field, as evidenced by the regional meetings conducted by regents throughout the state, indicate support for the action plan. (BJD)

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NATIONAL FORUM ON EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION
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I see my role primarily as one of representing the field and also responding, if you will, as the field might respond to the Regents' Action Plan. I suppose that when the A Nation At Risk study came out last spring my response was quite typical of your response. First, it was to run and hide because it was difficult to know what to say or how to respond. Then, with time for reflection we attempted to deflect the blame on to somebody else; i.e. "they're not talking about my school district they're talking about yours." In the State of New York we all know that New York State has always been ahead of everybody else and it is obvious that the A Nation At Risk study was not talking about New York State schools. And when the Regents' Action Plan came out it was to ensure that New York State remained in a prominent position relative to other states and schools throughout the country. I think this is a tendency for all of us. It is difficult to deal with criticism and to respond appropriately without appearing to be defensive. However, we are over that now and hopefully we are together and finally realizing that, in fact, some of the things that are being said we in the field have been saying for a long time. We have been quite frustrated with our inability to achieve results consistent with expectations. Perhaps with the criticism will come some help. I think it is a very exciting time for all of us.

Elmira is a small city school district in upstate New York. We have about 4,500 students within the City of Elmira and 4,500 students in a rural area outside the city. We have about 600 teachers. Twenty percent of our students are ADC (Aid to Dependent) children and we have about ten percent minority. We are a diverse population and probably not unlike many of the school districts that you know. I don't presume to speak for all superintendents and I don't presume to speak for all professional people in the State of New York, however, I think that there is a commonality of response to A Nation At Risk and the Regents' Action Plan and there is a consensus of what we should do.

I have distributed to each of you a two-page handout. The first page is a

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position paper and the second page is a survey of our staff. I will go through the survey to help you become more familiar with the Regents' Action Plan and also to explain some of the concerns and reactions to it. First of all, the position paper is really not unlike any other position paper we have seen. Most position papers have a very similar format and theme. They all begin by saying "we generally support the thrust of the proposal, we think it is appropriate, we think it is achievable, but..." The position paper reflects the exceptions and concerns we have regarding the Regents' Action Plan. This position paper was drafted from our survey and also from a number of staff meetings.

I might point out that in reviewing the survey you will see that generally there is a great deal of support for the Regents' Action Plan. However, instead of concentrating on the support, I would rather restrict my comments to the areas of concern.

There was a fairly strong negative reaction to the proficiency requirement in foreign language because the State is requiring it for all students. There is a concern that we will have high schools in which students will be enrolled not only in remedial classes in reading, writing and mathematics because of their failure to pass the Regents' Competency Tests that they need for graduation, as is the present case, but they will also be required to take a foreign language remedial class in order to qualify for a diploma. If the proficiency requirement is comparable to the present level of difficulty of the Regents' Competency Tests, we can expect about twenty-five percent of the Elmira students to fail the test initially. However, I might point out that last year in our District only one student failed to graduate as a result of failure to pass the RCT's. With remediation most students seem to be able to measure up by the time they finish their high school career and are able to qualify for a diploma.

In looking at the response of the staff to the standards and expectations section I think it is interesting to note that in the first paragraph the Regents are increasing the testing requirements in the elementary area and you can see there is a slight support of the staff but that actually does not reflect the attitude of the total staff. It was the secondary teachers that voted for that, not the elementary teachers. Just the opposite is reflected in the next paragraph where the Regents are talking about increasing test

requirements and standards for secondary. You can guess who voted for that - the elementary and not the secondary.

More than five years ago when the Regents' Competency Test program was put in place there were a number of us, and I was included, who had dire predictions for the effect of that testing program. We could just see all kinds of increases in dropout rates and we felt that it was the wrong thing to do. We estimated that perhaps twenty-five percent of our students would be denied the opportunity for a diploma. Last year .7 percent of the students in the State of New York failed to receive a diploma because of their failure to pass those tests. Of the 750 students in our School District only .03 percent or one failed to pass the test so the tests haven't been the barrier to graduation that we presumed they would be. I have seen a lot of benefit from the RCT program and today I support it even though a few years ago I did not.

The interdisciplinary project has received a great deal of discussion. Again, the survey results would indicate that the staff is generally against it. That is almost totally a secondary reaction. With secondary teachers interdisciplinary programs require that teachers from discipline "X" must communicate with teachers from discipline "Y". Elementary teachers teach all subjects so they don't feel that "logistically" an interdisciplinary program creates any real problem.

The remedial work proposal is strongly opposed primarily because there is a concern that the Regents are going to take all of the remedial reading resources and remedial math resources away and return the remediation responsibility to the classroom teacher. That is not the case. The Regents are suggesting that there may be a better model for dealing with youngsters with reading and math deficiencies and that the major concern, and I certainly share this concern, is the "pullout-syndrone" where students are being pulled out of the regular classroom in order to attend a remedial class. There has to be a better way and I would hope that the Regents' Action Plan will deal with that.

The reporting requirement mandates every school district will prepare a report for the public and the State. Some of the teachers, I think they were kidding with me, said they voted for that because they thought it meant that superintendents would have more work to do. Frankly, as a superintendent I think that we all

benefit by being more open with the public, by reporting test results, by being more accountable in relation to test results and using test results as a means for evaluating program. I think that since we are in an era of requiring additional resources we have to be willing to pay the price - to be more open with our public and to be accountable.

The extension of the school year probably is the most controversial item in the Regents' proposal. I think it should be understood that it is an extension of the work year more than an extension of the school year. Teacher's negative reaction to extension of the school year is not based on a perception that this would be working harder without receiving more money. They are very leery about any extension of the school year. Their response seems to be "let's see if we can't make better use of existing time first and then if we can't let's look at some other alternatives" but let's not extend the school year at this time. I have an additional concern. We have made an extensive investment in staff development in our District. Last year 400 teachers out of 600 participated in summer workshops. I'm not sure our District could plan meaningful staff development activities for all 600 teachers. In addition, the costs are considerable.

The proficiency in foreign language which would be required of elementary teachers has come under a great deal of scrutiny and discussion. I think primarily it is because no one has said yet what that foreign language would be and whether it would be a foreign language selected by the employer. There are many questions regarding this and until this is clarified there will be a great deal of skepticism.

Overall, reports from the field, as evidenced by the regional meetings that the Regents have conducted throughout the State, indicate support for the Plan. I certainly look forward to working with the Regents to implement the Plan. I think there is a great danger in taking a plan that has a certain fabric and cohesiveness and begin to divide it and chop it up. I hope the Regents will be able to resist fragmenting the Plan, thus destroying its overall design and intent. Of course, there are a lot of people who would like to see that happen. The Plan is comprehensive. It deals with just about every aspect of educating children in the elementary and secondary schools of the State of New York. I am very supportive of the Plan and I think I generally reflect the views of my colleagues in the State.